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AUTHOR Muniz, Eva Vera
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ABSTRACT

In early stages of writing, the writing process encourages "writing the way we talk," but in the end students are expected to write as academicians: a student must control his/her written level of language. For English speaking students, needing to belong to ingroups, and the casual attitude of American society both contribute to students' decisions (or inabilities) to use an appropriate level of language for writing. Students who have grown up speaking and listening to Black English Vernacular, Spanglish (a hybrid of English and Spanish), or other languages often have difficulty writing in Standard American English. Teaching students various levels of writing from casual to informal to formal, a writing teacher developed a lesson to help students determine the appropriate level to use for their audience when writing academic papers. Hearing, analyzing, and presenting a fairy tale in three different writing levels, students realize the importance of writing levels to their audience. (Contains five references.) (SC)

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Lassoing Levels of Language

By

Eva Vera Muñiz
Instructor of English
Del Mar College
Corpus Christi, Texas

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Lassoing Levels of Language

I work with developmental students as well as freshman level community college students. Ever since my first semester in the Fall of 1993 as an English fellow at Del Mar College in Corpus Christi, TX, I discovered that students have difficulties in determining the appropriate words to use when writing. The comment, "I write the way I talk," has recurred to this day. I always answer, "Of course, we all do." I explain that the writing process encourages "writing the way we talk" in the early stages, but in the end, students are expected to write as academicians. I use the following simile to help my Texan students understand: Like a cowboy lassos a steer, a student must control his/her written level of language.

Although students come from diverse backgrounds, they share this same problem. Some people believe the problem is simply that students who do not speak appropriately do not write appropriately. This idea sounds logical especially when analyzing this first group of students whose only language is English. These students should have no trouble using the appropriate words when writing, yet they do. Why, then, does this problem occur? The answer may be due to various factors. One factor is the need for students to belong to ingroups. These ingroups sometimes known as "punks," "surfers," "valley girls," etc. strive to maintain their unique oral vocabulary and body movements. When these students write in an academic setting, many cannot (some perhaps choose not to) decide which level of language to use. Another factor is perhaps the casual attitude of our American society. With the cultural revolution of the 1960s, oral and written language has become informal even to the point of "down right" casual. Slang and even obscenities are found in the literature of the day. Even though this idea may be acceptable in everyday speech, students face overwhelming problems in developing the written word especially

in an academic setting. Yet another factor may be due to the diverse cultures found in the United States. Standard American English is made up of words "borrowed" from the various cultural/ethnic groups along with English and other languages.

Another group of students is comprised of those who do not speak English well because they have had little exposure to standard American English. Even though their primary language is English, they may speak another "unofficial" language known as Black English Vernacular (BEV) or Ebonics. On December 18, 1996, the Oakland school board made national headlines when it unanimously approved a resolution declaring BEV or Ebonics a formal language. They received negative responses from many Americans, Black and White alike, who believed the school board was lowering standards. While linguists such as Guy Bailey from the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, Walt Wolfram from North Carolina State University (Gibbs 25) as well as Kephra Burns a writer and armchair linguist do **not** consider BEV another language (Burns 150), they do agree that BEV must be understood by teachers in order to help their students acquire the standard. Because BEV students use this language orally, they have problems when writing.

In South Texas, a third group of students use a cross-mixture of English and another "unofficial" language. Many of these students speak and attempt to write in Tex-Mex or Spanglish, which is a hybrid of English and Spanish. These predominantly Hispanic students may belong to ingroups referred to as "Cholos," "Pachucos," "Low Riders," etc., whose members use their unique oral vocabulary and body movements, thus resulting in writing problems.

A fourth group of students is the English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) who use English as a secondary language. Teachers are very tolerant of the language problems encountered by these students, so many programs have been developed to help the foreign-born

students learn to write. Therefore, the ESOL students tend to write better than they speak. Yet, even they have the need to belong to American ingroups and so, at times, encounter difficulties in choosing the appropriate level of language to use when writing.

At times, the above characteristics of the groups overlap and, of course, other factors contribute to their writing problems. In any case, students have problems in using the appropriate level of language when writing. Therefore, I developed a lesson which helps students learn the various levels of language of their audience to help them determine the appropriate level to use when writing academic papers. I teach students the various levels from casual to informal to formal based on the characteristics of each level outlined in The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers by Maxine Hairston and John J. Ruszkiewicz (189-194).

First, I begin the lesson by playing a taped narrative of a "Low Rider" telling the beginning of the story of "Little Red Riding Hood." Students then read the characteristics of the casual level in relation to the taped portion of the story. They understand that their audience is a member of an ingroup so not all of the vocabulary is understood by everyone. They also understand that oral communication along with body movements is necessary to express ideas. I ask them to name other ingroups. The labels which I stated in the above paragraphs were provided directly from my students' responses.

Then, I read the middle part of the traditional story directly from an anthology of children's stories and poems (Brothers Grimm 51). After reading the characteristics of the informal level, students understand that this language relies on the words on the page and is used when the audience understands most of the vocabulary; no memberships in any ingroups and little body movements are necessary to express ideas.

The conclusion of the story is read by the students themselves. Each student is asked to take turns reading only one sentence of "Little Red Riding Hood Revisited" by Russell Baker, which is written in the formal level. After discussing the characteristics of the formal level, students understand that this level reverts to other ingroups. However, the members of these ingroups are trained to use their particular lingo both orally and in writing, but no body movement is necessary to express ideas. Students then identify the groups as such legal professionals use legal terminology, medical professionals use medical terminology; computer professionals use computer terminology, etc.

The next step is to organize the students into groups of three. Each group picks a different fairy tale. Each student writes the entire chosen for that group as follows: the beginning of the story using the casual level, the middle using the informal level, and the end using the formal level. In the following class period, each group tells its fairy tale to the class. To save time, each student picks which part to orally present, but the entire fairy tale is written. The students then discover that in relating the casual part, most students don't use the paper but verbally tell the story and use the appropriate body movements. In relating the informal part, students do rely on the paper and use mainly facial expressions. Finally, in relating the formal part, students rely heavily on the paper and tend to use no body movements.

The outcome is usually comical, but they do learn the lesson. Each student establishes his or her own writing goal. Because they learn that their chosen professions will require them to learn the field's lingo, students then strive to belong to another, perhaps more educated, ingroup. Thereafter, when I check their writing and circle a word or words with two L's (Level of Language), students understand that they have lassoed an inappropriate level for their audience.

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